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# The Flavour of Homeland in Diaspora: Food as a Marker of Self Identification in Diana Abou Jaber's *Crescent*

# نكهة الوطن في المهجر: الطعام عاملا للتحديد الذاتي للهوية في رواية الهلال لديانا ابوجابر

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**Abstract:**

This article presents a critical analysis of Diana Abu-Jaber's Novel *Crescent*; it examines the fictional representation of food as a marker of identity and an articulator of nostalgia for the lost homeland. Diana Abu-Jaber often uses food as a literary device and a significant theme in her writings. The presence of food and the act of eating in her books are used as an important and meaningful symbols since they often function as a compass in the new space – in the United States – establishing as well a bridge between the place of origin and the new setting as the Arab immigrants present in her novels deal with different kinds of displacement, mainly the geographical one.

**Keywords:** Food, Self-Identification, Nostalgia, Diana Abu Jaber, Diaspora

**الملخص:**

يعالج هذا المقال التمثيل الخيالي للطعام في رواية الهلال لديانا أبو جابر. تطرق المقال إلى استعمال الطعام باعتباره محددا للهوية و باعثا للحنين إلى الوطن الأصلي. تستعمل ديانا أبو جابر الطعام غالبا وسيلة أدبية، وتجعل منه موضوعا عاما في كتاباتها. يعد حضور الطعام و الأكل في كتبها رمزا هاما و ذا دلالة، لأنه يؤدي غالبا وظيفة البوصلة في الفضاء الجديد -الو م أ- ، مُشَكِّلا كذلك جسرا بين المكان الأصلي و الإطار الجديد، بما أن المهاجرين العرب الحاضرين في رواياتها يواجهون أنواعا متعددة من التشرد، خصوصا الجغرافي. و قد جعلت أبو جابر نفسُها الطعام كناية عن رابط إنساني عظيم، و شيءا من الحميمية .

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الطعام، تحديد الذات، الحنين، ديانا أبو جابر، المهجر.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Having food is now not only regarded as the activities to fulfil the biological needs, as food is inevitably social and cultural product. Food becomes one of apparatuses to observe and understand cultures as it can reveal a community's stories and histories and all important events of human beings (Rahn, 2006: 32). Sutton (2001:3) mentions "...food can hide powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian."[1] It means that food can unveil the hidden stories behind the obvious. Holtzman (2006: 364)[2] mentions that food functions as marker for immigrant communities, an arena for nostalgia, and a connection with family.

In the diasporic life, food is the bridge between the old world and new world, the homeland .When one is away from the homeland, food plays a strong influence in the present community. Madhur Jaffreys in *Invitation to Indian Cooking* (qtd. in Mannur, 2010: 31)[3] claims that the one's condition in diasporic life creates a significant longing for the homeland's comestibles. Once one leaves the physical borders of the homeland, the feeling of

missing the homeland's apparatuses will rise. One will search for the apparatuses that may be able to bring his memory back to him as part of his surviving efforts to his upcoming life

Arab-Americans form part of these communities for whom food is not only regarded as the activities to fulfil the biological needs but is considered as an expression of Arabness and a strong identity marker, it could be for such reason that the landscape of Arab American literature in the past and present continues to flourish with food metaphors, colourful descriptions of old world dishes and even cooking tips. Several anthologies and edited volumes incorporate food in their titles. Diana Abu Jaber's food memoir, entitled *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and Pauline Kaldas' *Letter from Cairo* (2007) are two examples of prominent works that weave together narrative and recipes. Predictions that food writing is merely the first stage of ethnic literatures have, in this case, yet to prove true. With this notable trend in mind, one is forced to ask the following question: How does food fit into the act of self-representation, and thus, the question of identity?

## 2. A Literature Review on Identity Construction

In order to proceed with the analysis of the texts under study how food is considered as an important marker identity in the host country, a brief review of existing literature on identity construction within diasporic context must be discussed. In fact, identity is a hotly contested issue at virtually every level of our social lives. While identities may be made and unmade, the stakes in the production process are always high and always political. We can look to virtually any corner of the globe and bear witness to the feet that identities are worth fighting for. People are willing to give them lives in order to secure a place on a map that they can call their own.

Conceptions of identity range all the way from the notion of an autochthonous human born with attributes that attach permanently to self—a rooted theory of identity (Asante, 1990)—to the idea that the very concept of identity is a mythic invention of the modernist movement (Adorno, cited in Bronner &Kellner, 1987) to the notion that identities are routed through experiences of travel, contact, displacement, and relocation (Clifford, 1998; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Pratt, 1992). While there exist multiple approaches to the study of identity across the social sciences and the humanities most of the debates emerge out of two competing theories of identity: rooted and routed theories of identity. On the one hand, proponents of rooted theories of identity have imagined it as a bounded collective held together by common cultural traits and practices such as language, food, religion, ritual, expressive forms, and economic practices, as well as an attachment to land. Both identity and culture are conceptualized as discrete and fixed.

The ethnic absolutism implicit in such rooted theory assumes that identity, culture, and history are "already accomplished facts" (Hall, 1996, 110). Rooted theories of identity have pull in postcolonial national imaginations because a return to one's roots helps ease the pain of being "othered" and erased by dominant modes of western knowledge production. Moreover, the

colonial encounter begins with a loss of identity, attracting those who morn a lost past, cultural forms, and indigenous sensibilities. To a large degree this theory of identity assumes autochthonous claims by tribal people. Rooted theory assumes further that in most traditional cultures natives rarely travel outside of their communities, leaving little room for contact with other peoples.

This theoretical approach is problematic on several levels. The essentialism that drives it cannot account for difference, nor can it contend with contemporary global conditions of diaspora, dispersion, and cross-cultural contact. What is more, there is not necessarily the polarity between tradition and modernity which rooted theory assumes. Rooted theories are also essentialist at the level of national identity. Roots imply that identity is tied to territory, that there is a natural relationship between land and language, blood and soil, and that there exists an immutable link between cultures, identities and fixed places (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996).

On the other hand, routed theories of identity assume that identities are made and unmade through cultural contact and discursive formations. Routes imply that identities are constructed in and through travel and contact, calling into question the multiple layers of mediation that bear on identity, movement, contact, and social space. Routes assume further that identities are constructed, that identity formation is at base a process of production. Identities, from this perspective, are contingent and fluid. Routed theories of identity also problematize the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries, a move which, in some ways, deterritorializes the production of identity.

Many forces have prompted scholars to rethink identity, and particularly national identities: global scattering and migration (Bartkowski, 1995; Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Pries, 1999); transnational economic structures and cultural flows (Appadauri, 1996); the fissures of our global political economy (Harvey, 1985); and the breakdown of nation-states (Morely & Robbins, 1994). These conditions and others such as ethnic wars, fundamentalist coups, and desperate economies have led to the emergence of diasporas. Given that diasporic peoples, who come predominantly from former colonies and postcolonial nation-states, are located within the heart of many western metropolises, diasporic identities stand at the intersection of multiple national attachments. As diasporic peoples straddle the boundaries between their former homelands and the nations in which they have relocated, they put pressure on the mechanisms through which nations try to cement national identity. Moreover, as Gilroy has documented so brilliantly, diasporas reveal the ways in which people navigate and negotiate a way of living double-consciousness, a mode of subjectivity that renders identities liminal, while challenging the ideologies driving the melting pot of culture.

Dislocation, therefore, tends to intensify a sense of divergence from the mainstream. Old patterns and beliefs are revised and new ones are created. Schutz (1932/1967 Cited in Ritzer, 2000: 426)[4] explored the concept of consciousness in the everyday world and he observed that,

> As long as things are running smoothly in accord with recipes, reflective consciousness is relatively unimportant, and actors pay little attention to what is going in their minds or the minds of others.

However, when these patterns and "recipes" change, a new sense of self-awareness kicks in, and the individual construction of his new reality is revised accordingly. A dialectical process takes place between the 'Self' and the 'Other.' Accordingly, a heightened sense of distinctiveness can often occur due to being in a visible minority position in relation to the dominant White mainstream cultures. Factors such as accents, skin colour, and for some, the wearing of the *hijab* can increase their alienation and "otherness" especially when such images are portrayed in the media in a negative fashion. In fact, the Arab women are especially vulnerable due to the fact that they are both women and Muslim. They are subject to a double measure of oppression, having to cope with racial and gendered constructs that lead to increased marginalization and exclusion.

### 3. Identity and Food

People do not eat all kind of food even they are omnivores. Every social group has different classification of edible and inedible items in everyday diet and even the manners to eat food are considered to be very culturally specific. (Prescott, 2003: 5-6) For that reason, many cultures seem to go to considerable lengths to obtain preferred food rather than just consuming what is available. The basis for food preferences by a culture seems to be dependent on a wide variety of factors ranging from "convenience, availability and nutrition" (Belasco, 2008: 7-16) to "cultural and social influences, taboos, myths, customs and manners associated with food, religious beliefs, social status, etiquettes and marketing etc." (Stanton, 2003: 449-52) That is why, Fox, (n.d) argued that the relationship of food and identity is functionally combined in by two directions: from individual to collective (psychological to social) and from biological to cultural (nutritional to symbolic activity) about our place in the society. Since every society has its own food patterns and dietary laws; what people of one particular group eat becomes a symbol of who they are – their identity.

Food preferences reveal distinct identities based on age, sex, status, culture, religion and even occupation. Contrasts between the identities of one's own group (e.g. our food) and those of other group (their food) become apparent through interaction between cultures when individuals move or migrate. Food in the context of migration plays a vital role as immigrants no matter where they go keep practicing their homeland food ways and use food as an icon to set and maintain these boundaries between homeland (us) and new land (them). Rowe (2009) argues that it is observed in migrants' communities that food acculturation takes place quite longer even immigrants have acculturated in other spheres e.g. language acculturation. And it is claimed that immigrants do not practice homeland food ways as a reminder of home only but they try to maintain their connection to homeland and also to sustain their homeland identities through food. (Belasco, 2008: 16 & Bell, 2003: 513-14) But this relationship that migrants establish between original and new home places through food is not straightforward and varies how different immigrants practice this process of reconstructing their identity through food in a new cultural setting depending on multiple factors such as age, gender, religion, generation, characteristics

of homeland and new land etc.

In fact, while moving between the boundaries of cultural and geographical space, the immigrant experience offers a rare glimpse into the fluidity of identity and the cultural boundaries of resistance and change. As a transitional status, the immigrant cultural experience also offers us insights into the complexity of patterns of relationships between dominant and minority groups, change and resistance, and patterns of "ethnic" experience, racism and identities. The literature on enculturation, identity retention and identity incorporation offers us the complex arrangements of ethnicity often resulting from the immigrant experience (Modood and Werbner, 1997).

Identities, therefore, are not fixed social constructs, but are constructed and reconstructed within given social formations, reflecting the existing and imagined structural constraints and lived experiences of subjects. Various individual, cultural, historical, social and economic influences shape our food choices. Our food choices, like various other cultural expressions and practices, offer insights on how we present ourselves shape our identities, define our membership and express our distance from others. Changes in food preferences may also reflect changes in broader cultural perceptions and practices. As a culturally and spatially transitional stage, the immigration process introduces possibilities of change and resistance to new habits, new behaviours and new cultural experiences. Especially in the case of new immigrants who deal with tensions of adaptation or resistance to changes in lifestyle, consumption patterns and forms of cultural expression have consequences on their physical and mental health, their perceptions of self and relations with others, as well as their potential for successful settlement and integration. As an essential component of our culture, food is also central to our sense of identity (Fischler, 1988). In their daily activities, people assume various identities, defining who they are and how they can live their lives. Cultural identity is expressed in various everyday practices, such as religious observations, rights of passage, language, leisure activities, clothing, art and literature, By observing cultural practices and preferences, such as food choice, we may gain valuable insights into the levels of individual or collective tendencies for adaptation, identification or diversity.

## 4. The Metaphor of Food in Literature

Food is a powerful, ubiquitous metaphor. It informs our senses, conjures emotions and speaks to our fundamental survival. Terry Eagleton, literary critic and cultural theorist, claims that “food looks like an object but is actually a relationship, and the same is true of literary works” (Griffiths, 1998: 213). Because food is central to cultural life, its metaphorical existence can be presumed to be equally persistent. As a metaphorical representation, food extends our relationship with literature and lends context to cultural and social interactions. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz claims that “consumption is always conditioned by meaning” and is “at the same time a form of self-identification and communication” ( cited in Round, 2006: 54)[5].

According to Mary Douglas we are unable to fully escape the symbolic role that food plays in our society, even as we might try:

If the modern consumer is not behaving convincingly as a market-minded individual,

neither seeking or using education about food values and food costs, perhaps the explanation is that the symbolic aspects of food in the system of social class really get in the way of optimizing expenditures for health and hygiene (1984: 9)[6]

Food is a social tool that signals subtle nuances about class, income level, and the value one places upon health. Categories of food (such as "snack," "meal," or "drink") signal the social expectation and accompanying social boundaries, and as Douglas notes, "the taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one" (Douglas, 1997:36). These considerations point to the nature of food in our society as a symbol laden with meaning and class distinction, and of our collective willingness to align with the symbol over our biological needs.

George Lakoff claims that we think in terms of metaphor and then unconsciously act out the consequences of the metaphor. According to Lakoff, our conceptual system is "fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (1980: 158)[7]. Because language dictates our conceptual system, the way that we think about things and act upon them is intimately related to metaphor. Metaphors "play a central role in the construction of social and political reality," according to Lakoff (1980: 159). Just as language do not only reflects the world, but creates our understanding of it (Brummett, 1993: 69), so do metaphors construct our understanding and create our reality as it relates to certain events in Lakoff's view. How we think about events such as arguments influences our actions and reactions, how we resolve an issue, or not, and how the event is "recorded" in our own histories as well as the history of our larger culture are all constructed through language. "We act according to the way we conceive of things," says Lakoff (1980: 5)[8]. My intent in incorporating Lakoff's views into this research is to demonstrate the power of conceptual metaphor as it relates to identity construction and food, and how it systematically shapes ideology about food

Sociologist Patricia Allen suggests that food choice, consumption and the subsequent moralistic judgments are framed and defined by discourse (2004: 81). As these metaphors are reproduced they work to elevate food to religious significance, thus creating a discourse that elevates symbolic value while justifying the moralistic judgments that often accompany food choice and consumption. These metaphors are charged with the embedded values in our culture, thus creating the illusion of neutrality and invisibility (Richardson, 1990:122). It is through these metaphors that our values and actions around food are formed and often treated as "true" without further critical examination. Another aspect of the discourse of food is that which Allen identifies as "insidious" in that the "extent to which it can operate outside our awareness. This opacity makes it "a particularly effective shaper of reality" (Ibid: 81)[9]. Even while we are not consciously aware, however, we act upon discourse, just as we do symbols and metaphors that are embedded in our language. It is in this way that language establishes and enforces our value systems

## 5. Exploring Food in *Crescent*

Diana Abu-Jaber often uses food as a literary device and a significant theme in her writings. The presence of food and the act of eating in her books – specially in the novel *Crescent* and in the memoir *The Language of Baklava* – are used as an important and

meaningful symbols since they often function as a compass in the new space – in the United States – establishing as well a bridge between the place of origin and the new setting as the Arab immigrants present in her novels deal with different kinds of displacement, mainly the geographical one. Abu-Jaber herself defined the "metaphor" of food as "such a great human connector," and something "intimate" (5). She keeps on arguing that it is "the most powerful way of creating the metaphor of the heart and gathering place, a place where the collective forms" (5)[10].

In *Crescent*, Arab immigrants identify with the atmosphere of Nadia's Café, also referred to in the novel as Alladin's Hidden Treasure – a little fragment of their homelands. The café has an important role to play in the plot since it functions as a unifying metaphor, ironically, of Arabs' many – and therefore heterogeneous – homelands. As described in the novel:

> The café is like other places – crowded at meals and quiet in between – but somehow there are also usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same group of students from the big university up the street, *always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue motes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven't met.* (Abu-Jaber: 17, emphasis added)[11]

The café also functions as the space where memories of past experiences materialize. In a certain way, it takes on the role of a museum: instead of displaying ancient objects that retell stories of the past, it is rather an interactive museum of the senses, where old tastes blend with the new, permeated always by the smell of Sirine's dishes. As Gardaphé and Xu (2007: 7)[12] write,

> In Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, the language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture, and roots. This language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafés, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and re-establish identities and communities.

Indeed, in *Crescent*, it is the café the place where the collective forms and also fosters bonds among the regular customers through the very act of eating and participating in that ritual. The smells and flavours of 'Sirine's food seem to soften the feeling of loss of their homelands. As Carol Fadda-Conrey (2006) claims, in Abu-Jaber's novel,

> [t]he most important bridges are Sirine herself and the Middle Eastern food she cooks. From her pivotal position in the kitchen, which opens out to the rest of the café, Sirine serves as an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals of *Crescent*'s ethnic borderland. (p.196)[13]

Fadda-Conrey ponders that "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, underscores their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities" (Ibid:199). It is as if the Arab dishes prepared by the chef enter the regulars' nostrils and mouths and invade their minds with the memories of the Arab World, family and friends they left behind. Indeed, Sirine's cooking, explicitly described as anodyne, as well her presence in the café even encourage the students to confess their solitude and lament of being "invisible" in the American culture as once one of them revealed to her:

> How painful [it] is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he'd wanted all his life – sometimes

especially if it was what he'd wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don't have time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee-drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. *For many of them the café was a little flavor of home*. (Abu-Jaber: 9-20, emphasis added)[14]

The food served at the café is able to call their attention to their inner selves and momentarily the painful experience of missing one's homeland is forgotten. In this perspective, Sirine's presence in the kitchen and her food work as continuous memory rescuer. As a museum, where objects from the past are once again in contact with someone and re-enact the memory of early experiences, so function the food and the café in Abu-Jaber's novel When asked about the character Sirine, Abu-Jaber claimed that she wanted to "draw that kind of internal conflict: what part of me is Iraqi? What part of me is American?" She goes on to question if "it is something that I've inherited, something in the blood or something that people tell me I am?" (Fresh Air).

Being in the café's kitchen, for the chef, makes her feel as if she were in her mother's kitchen again. In fact, as Mercer and Strom (2007) express, it is "in the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to establish her own narrative of origin" (42)[15]. Her parents were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross and they were killed in a tribal clash in Africa. As the narrator comments, "on the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself" (Abu-Jaber: 50). Cooking the Arab food is the compass she uses to re-create her affective memories of her parents as well as to negotiate her Iraqi identity and meditate upon her life.

Sirine witnesses the regulars' satisfaction as they close their eyes while eating. If, on the one hand, eating her *baklava* makes the Arab students taste home, on the other, cooking this special dish also serves to orient her during the day. As the narrator comments, "Sirine feels unsettled when she begins breakfast without preparing baklava first; she can't find her place in things" (Abu-Jaber: 59)[16]. Moreover, *Crescent* also presents complex webs of food where the characters Sirine and Han seem to be looking for directions all the time. Food, in this way, acquires a different nuance since it offers the ground for those characters to discuss issues of diasporic displacement – location and direction for life.

On the one hand, Sirine is interested in learning about her father's culture and religion. As she was not raised immersed in her father's culture she does not understand her connection with the professor and Iraq. Hanif, on the other hand, needs directions to situate himself in the U.S. He declares to Sirine: "I really don't get the geography of this town." He continues by saying that, "It seems like things keep swimming around me. [When] I think I know where something is, then it's gone" (Abu-Jaber: 75)[17]. He feels displaced and finds in Sirine and in her way of cooking his real north – the needle for his compass.

Several passages from the novel corroborate my contention that food also relates to direction as it is present when these characters question their ideas of belonging and home. For instance, in one of

the first contacts between the chef and Hanif, she is in the kitchen when she sees Hanif entering the café. She feels something different and "thinks he does look different from the rest of the customers" (Abu-Jaber: 38). At that exact moment, she is making *knaffea* when Um-Nadia wisely says: "Ah, you've made knaffea today," she continues by asking Sirine, "who are [you] in love with, I wonder?" (Ibid.).[18] This passage shows an interesting connection between cooking and being in love as Sirine's first symbolic contact with Han occurs when she serves him "a plate of knaffea herself" (Ibid.). The description of the scene shows the impact of that contact not only for the two of them, but also for those sitting at the counter as they seem to be astonished by its intensity, as the passage demonstrates:

> Mirelle and Victor stop talking and Um-Nadia and the customers look up to see this break in precedent, even the two [American] policemen sitting by the TV, eating fried lentils and onions, and watching reports in Arabic about terrorists from Saudi Arabia. (Ibid.)

In the very moment the chef serves Han, the narrator describes her desire to give him the food. In fact, as it is mentioned, Sirine "has an impulse to sit and feed him by hand" (Ibid.: 39)[19]. She has a maternal instinct as if she knew his fragility and the uncertainty of his life in the U.S. The *knaffea*, as described, is to be a dish of love; by offering Han the dish Sirine is metaphorically offering her love to him. The triangle love / food / identity plays an important role in the novel as it allows the characters to question their lives. For Sirine, the symbolic act of cooking becomes a way of expressing and questioning her fears regarding Hanif and her connection to Iraq. Her food brings the professor closer to her. It is so uncomfortable for the chef to deal with the sensations he causes in her, but, at the same time, she feels something enigmatic in relation to him. She thinks that "Han seems to have some sort of *internal light* that makes him intriguing and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look directly, he's so charming and educated and worldly" (Ibid: 47, emphasis added)[20]. Han wants to teach Sirine about Iraq and the portion of the Arab culture she does not know, whereas Sirine teaches him about the U.S. and the intricacies of being American. Moreover, Sirine, on the one hand, "has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what is that she is missing" (Ibid: 62[21]). Actually, she unconsciously misses her other ethnic half – the one in which she had never had interest until her contact with Hanif. So, the professor has "the light" Sirine needs to understand her father's cultural roots.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Food plays significant roles in the diasporic life as it can unveil the hidden stories. Its functions as memory, including nostalgia, and identity as reflected in the novel. As a cultural product, food can take people to revisit the past and bring them to the present. Food, like other cultural elements, can reinvent the past in the homeland to the foreign soil. Memory and nostalgia are dynamic, as identity is always unstable. Being part of the past by having Arab food is also part of forming identity. Food is undoubtedly a key element for the analysis of Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. It is an artifact that brings together different ethnicities in the space of the café; it also functions as a spin board for both Sirine and Han to begin to negotiate their past memories. And, as a result, the

representation of food ends up being the ground for discussing political issues concerning the situation of Arab immigrants and their descendants in the United States. In *Crescent*, food is indeed a form of participation through which the immigrant characters long for home and for acceptance in the new environment. Eating traditional food from their homelands seems to compensate for their adverse situations.The vivid tastes of childhood dishes that permeate these spaces seemed to encourage the characters to unveil their past. Indeed, they contribute to the richness of Abu-Jaber's novel as food is not only a simple marker of ethnicity, but it is a strong metaphor of love, and a common language between the different ethnicities. In fact, Abu-Jaber's novel as food is not only a simple marker of ethnicity, but it is a strong metaphor of love, and a common language between the different ethnicities.

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